

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

PHALLOCENTRIC ATTITUDES IN *DANCE LIKE A MAN*

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Article Received: 19/08/2021

Article Accepted: 28/09/2021

Published online:30/09/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.3.306](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.3.306)

Abstract

Our society, unfortunately, is more androcentric. Men and women particularly in the Indian context are two poles apart. Patriarchy is prevalent and is accepted wholeheartedly across all communities. Men dominate the public and familial domain and are considered to be the decisive authority in social, political and economic matters. A Gynocentric Society that is free from subjugation and subversion at hands of male domination is an impractical and impossible idea to digest. Women are always subjected to the callous, apathetic and brutal treatments done by males in various roles they play as a father, a brother, a son or a husband. Literature has always been a vehicle to unearth the systematic tortures, oppressions by and violence done to this venerable and discarded sections of the society. The patriarchal approach has also decided gender roles to play mandatorily. There is clear demarcation between the career selection in terms of males and females. Mahesh Dattani, one of the pioneers of Modern Indian Theatre in English has also dealt with this systematic oppression motivated by stereotypical male attitudes and approaches in his well-known plays -- *Final Solutions*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Tara*, *Thirty Days in September* and *The Big Fat City*. In *Dance Like a Man* also an attempt has been made to minutely analyse humiliation and hurts; burdens and bruises; suffocation and stigma inflicted on women as a result of gender bias stereotypes celebrated by male section to cherish his traditionally set position and preoccupied masculinity laden sensibilities.

Keywords : Androcentric, Gynocentric, Subjugation, Stereotypes

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani, a distinguished Indian playwright in English has made his debut in the world of litterateurs having penned his first full length play, *Where There's a Will* in 1986. He is credited with the theatre group Playpen which was formed in 1984. He is the first playwright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for his book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998.

His plays have been directed by eminent directors like Arvind Gaur, Alyque Padamsee and Lillete Dubey. His insights into the social aspects has engaged readers' attention in social evils. His depiction of the dowry system, non-entity existence of vulnerable sections, checked individual freedom, systematic suppression and exploitation of women in the name of social taboos and stereotypes is profound and poignant. Dattani, being a keen and

meticulous observer of his immediate surrounding has always resorted to the milieu of the middle class Indian society. However his greatness likes in universalising the human predicament and conditions. So that readers from all over the world can identify themselves with his characters. He himself states: "The subjects that concern me are in fact fairly universal – coming to terms with the past, societal conflicts, internal dilemmas, etc." (Myles 111)

Dance Like a Man is replete with androcentric attitudes and approaches towards the venerable class. Mahesh Dattani, broadly speaking, takes stock of the characters like, Viswas and Amritlal and diagnose their masculine psyche functioning under some kind of age old construct to be abided by the people both males and females. These dogmas & taboos created not on the merit of a persons but have been percolated gradually over the years. One such social construct is the confinement of the art for dance only to women class of devdasi (temple dancer) and that too not to the women of so called respectable family. Phallogocentric custodians' cynicism is intense and intolerable when they notice that a man has resorted to dancing. Hence Jairaj who is passionate about making career in dancing falls prey to the societal norms so closely cherished by his father Amritlal in the name of family name and fame. Amritlal prides in upholding the standards and set beliefs of the mainstream society. He deters Jairaj's individual freedom to choose the dancing as a career for his being a man.

Another kind of gender prejudice is palpable in Viswas' ill behaviour with Lata by virtue of his manliness. He leaves no stone unturned to make fun of soon-to-be-wife Lata. His patriarchal approach and attitude towards Lata and would be in-laws i.e. Jairaj and Ratna can be sensed in his derisive discourse with Lata when the play opens. Moreover, his attention seeking arrogance in the name of masculinity; reference to dowry; hinting at his conservative mother unlikely to allow Lata to tan her legs and wear skirt; interest in having dowry from the parents of a bride; boasting of his wealth and his over concern with material things are to be closely seen under the gamut of what we term as patriarchal attitude. Anita Myles aptly remarks:

Dance Like a Man examines the role of authority and prejudice socially and culturally. The playwright compels us to look into our own individual and collective consciousness. The underlying irony and pathos of the human predicament has been successfully brought out by Dattani. Truly the play mirrors the grotesque images of all that is superficially accepted as normal in life. (135)

This paper is an attempt to explore phallogocentric sensibilities prevalent in society through the character of Viswas, Amritlal particularly and Lata's uncle to a little extent. Viswas who is a would be son-in-law of Jairaj and Ratna takes pride in the stereotype of masculinity right from the opening of the play. Amritlal despite being father of Jairaj, has strong objection over his dancing as dancing effeminates man. That Amritlal is driven by gender bias is crystal clear by the fact of his being in league of people assigning roles to gender in the society. Evidently, he objects to the dancing of his daughter-in-law Ratna also for he considers dance as an art of eroticism and is a forte of the Chennai Amma like woman.

An insight into the title *Dance like a Man* itself hints at the underpinnings of gender bias. It is a metaphor of an 'authoritarian order' to be followed by the marginal, weak or vulnerable. It is an imperative sentence which is typical of Amritlal like people who have reserved the art of dancing limited only to women in flesh trade. Hence this sentence inheres in it an idea of 'order', 'power', and 'command', imposed by the mainstream class of stereotypical thinking, to which the women of respectable families and the men as well are supposed to follow unquestioningly. So whether the women or men of respectable families, the *title Dance like a Man* connotes to act as per the rules set by the mainstream society. It means they have to do only those works and chores which are not taboos or stigmas from masculinity driven people. Amritlal's son Jairaj bares forth his anguish of unfulfilled desire of becoming a dancer of national and international repute due to the rotten mentality of his father Amritlal who advocates, "The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares—what business did a man have

learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learns such a craft could not be a man. How could I argue against such logic?" (Act I p.25) Helplessness of Jairaj to realize his dream compels him to prostrate to the autocratic and authoritarian attitude of his father. Evidently in the name of gender prejudice both the girls and boys are equally kept on the periphery. They are denied space and remain non-entity.

Dancing was reserved and limited to the devadasis (temple dancers). It was considered to be disgraceful blot on the face of a society run by, in the words of Jairaj "a handful of stubborn, narrow-minded individuals with fancy pretentious ideals." (Act I p.38) It is these people who pass the decree and decide codes of living in the society. Amritlal represents this class. He is against such temples of dancing and dancers and substantiates this contempt to Jairaj during the argument over dancing taken up by him as a career (which is certainly more objectionable to people like him), "As you know our priority is to eradicate certain unwanted and ugly practices which are a shame to our society." (Act I p.38) Now a man who is critical of an art sees his own son, through the prism of gender construct, resorting to dancing with high passion. He gets perturbed by the idea of getting his son effeminate. This would certainly mean great damage to his family honour, name and fame. After all, he was one of the vanguards trying to eradicate the practice of dancing. So, no question arises as regards his own son developing any kind of liking for or adopting dancing. This kind of preoccupied belief dividing the arts (crafts) on the lines of gender and shackling the individual freedom of choosing career is certainly unwelcoming. Thus the play not only portrays a conflict between conservative thinking about gender roles and the new modernity creating its own individual narrative of not differentiating one art from another on the basis of gender. The emphatic assertion of Mahesh Dattani in one of his interview is pertinent here:

Thematically, I talk about the areas where the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about such people who are striving to expand this space. They live on the fringes of the

society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe space for themselves as they can. (Prasad 156)

Hence his instruction to Jairaj, is "Dance like a Man" meaning behave or act like a man and follow the dogmas and decorum set and decided by such a male oriented society. According to Amritlal, 'a man's happiness lies' in 'being a man.' (Act II p.49) Amritlal is so much obsessed with the construct of assigned gender roles, that in the event of non-compliance by his son Jairaj, he expels him along with his wife. Amritlal's gender biased nature once again comes to fore when he says to Ratna, "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic." (Act II p.50)

Amritlal's mind is infested with prejudice against women is also discernible in his objection over Ratna's going to Chennai Amma 'to learn the art of abhinaya from her.' Chennai Amma, a seventy five years old woman is indeed the lone survivor of the dying dance form 'abhinaya'. In the words of Ratna, "She is the oldest living exponent of the Mysore School." (Act I p.42) But Amritlal prevents her going to Chennai Amma by citing reasons that passers-by look at her. When Ratna rebuts and suggests to invite Chennai Amma to her house to learn the art, Amritlal's true colours of phallogocentric attitude surface and he outrightly denies permission to Ratna. Dipti Agrawal's observation in this regards is very apt to cite:

There is much in the play to be read between the lines – the man who takes up a 'feminine' vocation is a wimp, a woman who cares about her career is a bad wife, careless mother, and manipulative human being etc. This perfect blend of the theme and emotions of the characters with the stage settings depict Dattani's excellence in the craft of communicating through theatre. (300)

Another important character who flaunts male-centric attitude in the play is Viswas. Viswas visits Lata's house to ask for her hand in marriage. He feels irritated and annoyed at not finding her would be in-laws to welcome him. Viswas, now

driven by preoccupied masculine sensibility at once takes the stereotypical jibe at Lata about his parents by taunting, "They also say at home when they have invited their future son-in-law to their house." (Act I p.3) He is completely devoid of any concern for Lata and shoots another stereotypical arrow to hurt the sentiments of Lata as regards the issue of marrying of daughters, "I am sure they are anxious to get rid of you." Not only this, intoxicated with the predominance of the patriarchal system running through his body and mind. He takes no time to initiate the subject of dowry. For dowry decides the social standing of a male and bears testimony to the smooth functioning of the patriarchal system. This social construct percolated into his psyche is discernible in his endorsement, " We will probably discuss wedding details. You know, things like what they are going to give you," (Act I p.3) This construct of dowry which at once positions women at a lower level in hierarchical and patriarchal system has been accepted as gospel-like truth. Lata's father Jairaj is not an exception to this social evil. When Viswas likes the shawl of Amritlal and expresses his desire to receive it as a present, Jairaj, very casually speaks about the most familiar subject of dowry, "It's only a shawl. Most boys would ask for a Maruti van." Ironically unwary of Viswas materialistic bent of mind of his would be son-in-law.

That woman is still not emancipated in making her career choices particularly after marriage. Lata seems to have accepted this societal construct when she entreats Viswas to allow her to continue with dancing after marriage, "Viswas, when we are married—you will let me come here to practise, won't you?" (Act I p.6) Viswas frustrates and hurts the sentiments of Lata to the point that she retorts, "We are not even married yet and I find you exasperating." (Act I p.8) But, Viswas who is already preoccupied with masculine mentality takes that for granted to make fun of Lata's father by calling him, 'Gujju?'

Viswas is more interested in the house of Lata at the heart of the city. On knowing that her father is reluctant to sell the house, he (Viswas) finds another way out. He thinks that once he is married to Lata then he is entitled to everything that is

owned by Jairaj and Ratna (Lata's father), as he says, "Looks like I should be lucky if he parts with you." (Act I p.12)

It is surprising to see that under the gamut of gender bias, a woman is hostile to another woman. Viswas projects the typical image of his dominating mother who is going to turn out to be a very conservative mother-in-law for Lata by crippling and stifling her individual freedom of wearing clothes. Viswas gives impending danger to Lata, "She has eyes like a hawk, my mother! She'll even check to see how far up your legs are tanned so she'll know whether you wear mini skirts or not! (Act I p.12)

That man is divested with morality under the contagious impact of his sense of masculinity is further revealed with reference to Ratna's uncle. After having been expelled from the house by Amritlal, Jairaj with his wife takes refuge under the shelter provided by Lata's uncle. However, a woman has always been viewed as a commodity to use. Uncle stoops to the meanest level by making advances towards Ratna to gratify his animal instinct. The lewd and lecherous nature of Uncle is revealed during the spousal arguments between Jairaj and Ratna over returning to Amritlal's house. Jairaj reminds Ratna the reason for their return, "While your uncle asked you to go to bed with him? Would I have been a man then? Giving my wife to her own uncle because he was offering us food and shelter." (Act I p.31) This kind of people intoxicated with masculine supremacy are like wild animals ready to pounce on their prey regardless of their relationship. Such gruesome and heinous cases of brutalities are so prevalent in our society to be encountered almost every day, shattering and disgracing the most sacred and the closest relationship.

Conclusion

Thus the regress of the world is caused by the custodians infected with patriarchal mentality who trim the wings of the young people desirous of choosing their individual careers in the name of age old social constructs. As we see in the case of Amritlal. As a representative of a masculine mentality he imposes his opinions on Jairaj and Ratna not to pursue dance as a career. For it is a

social stigma to society. Jairaj cannot follow a dancing career for dance is restricted and limited to the woman. It effeminates men. As for Ratna, she is continuously discouraged not to dance. Ratna is denied taking dancing lessons from Chennai Amma as well. In Amritlal's society of first generation dancing is viewed as a means of earning livelihood by temple dancers (devadasi). Amritlal opines that their temples of dancing have turned into brothels of prostitutes. He has gone to the extent of joining the movement of eradicating such practices. Viswas also signifies the phallogocentric approach in his behaviour towards Lata. He doesn't show the behaviour of a gentleman free of gender bias. His funny remarks about Lata's parents; he's taken-for-granted attitude towards the vulnerability of women section; his reference to his mother ready to turn a strict mother-in-law for Lata; his manliness driven attitude of material vanity and even mockery of Lata together depicts him as a man supporting gender bias system. Not to forget the uncle of Lata who tries to molest her even when she is her niece and guest. This kind of deprivation and devaluation of any gender certainly deteriorates the society and rotten it at the root. This kind of mentality closes all the doors to creativity, innovation and originality. We can dream of a utopian society only after arming ourselves to combat such narrow-minded construct of gender discrimination to make room for androgynous approach above and beyond the androcentric or gynocentric approaches alone.

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